BATTLE AND HARMONY

THE WOMEN IN THE ODYSSEY

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The females in the *Odyssey* are just as intriguing as the male heroes, if not more so. In this paper, I shall deal first with the presentation of the female characters and second with the issue of culturally determined roles. Are the perceptions of gender roles completely culturally bound? Or can we detect genetic blueprints of more general validity? This last topic will be examined at the end.

Domestic women: Arete and Helen

The island of the Phaeacians, where Odysseus will make his final stop before returning to Ithaca, is an island of order *par excellence*. Not without reason has it been suggested that it is the ideal model of a Greek colony with an *agora* and a temple as focal points of the town. No less impressive is Alcinous' palace. His household is a model of harmonious family life: wife, daughter, sons all seem to relate well to each-other and the society around them. That the wife of the king, is a formidable woman is hinted at by Nausicaa when she advises Odysseus to go straight to Arete upon entering the house.

"Directly you have passed through the courtyard and into the buildings, walk quickly through the great hall till you reach my mother, who generally sits in the firelight by the hearth, weaving yard stained with sea-purple, and forming a delightful picture ... clasp my mother's knees if you wish to make certain of an early and happy return to your home.." (6, 297 -315)

Note Arete's position by the hearth. This is important because the hearth (in itself under the protection of a female deity) symbolizes the principal focus of the home; like the household fire, Arete too is the real center of the family. Penelope also is usually seated by the hearth (19, 55). (See also Whittaker in this volume). Equally interesting for our understanding of the Greek perception of the ideal domestic woman is the task that Arete is performing, namely weaving. This

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further defines her domestic identity; she must stay indoors for one does not weave in open areas. There is more to weaving, however: women can express their artistic skill in the loom. There was a lot of prestige attached to good handicraft as we can tell by the importance of the *peplos*, woven by eminent virgins of Athens, displayed at the Panathenaic festival. The goddess Athena herself excels in this task. No wonder womanhood and weaving are also associated in Greek art.

Arete seems kindly disposed to Odysseus but she first has to test him. She immediately recognizes the clothes he wears as belonging to her household. They were of course given to him by Nausicaa. Arete, then, emerges as kind but not gullible. She is perceptive, and clever.

Women are very perceptive about clothes for they weave them themselves. Penelope will also cross-examine the beggar (who is no other than Odysseus in disguise) using clothes as a test. When the beggar tells her the fictitious tale according to which he had met Odysseus, she immedietely asks: "Tell me what sort of clothes he was wearing and what he looked like ..." (19, 218)

Helen is a much more complex character. Still, the first thing we learn about her is that her womanhood is closely associated with her domestic task : "Helen with her ladies came down from her lofty perfumed room ... Phylo carried her silver work-basket, a gift from Alcandre ... who lived in Egyptian Thebes..." (4, 121-127) In weaving too, her skills are considerable. In book 15 we learn that she gave Telemachus as a parting gift a richly decorated robe, a work of her own hands. (15, 125-127)

More important is her characterization by the poet. Helen is very perceptive, far more so than her rather dull husband, Menelaus. When she first meets Telemachus she is the one who recognizes him as Odysseus' son, struck by the physical resemblance with his father. "Surely this must be king Odysseus' son Telemachus...", she exclaims. (4, 143)

There is another passage where Helen's perception and awareness of reality is sharper than that of her husband. As Telemachus is about to depart, an eagle is seen in the sky, carrying in his talons a great white goose.*

"Menelaus, for all his warlike qualities, was at a loss to give him (Telemachus) the correct interpretation, and his beautiful wife forestalled him. 'Listen', she said, 'while with such inspiration as I have I explain this omen and what I feel sure that it portends. Just as this eagle came down from his native mountains and pounced on our home-fed goose, so shall Odysseus, after many hardships and many wanderings, reach his home and have his revenge." (15, 169-178)

Helen is not only perceptive, she is also capable of manipulation, especially when it comes to turning a situation to her own advantage.

As the banquet proceeds, the hosts are inspired to tell stories about the Trojan war. Helen tells of how kind she had been to Odysseus once upon a time in Troy. In this story she wants to convey the impression that she was absolutely loyal to the Greeks even during her Trojan phase. But Menelaus tells quite a different story. Do you remember, when we were inside the Trojan horse, he says, how you imitated the voices of the Achaeans' wives to elicit a response from the hidden warriors and tempt them to come out? The juxtaposition of accounts by husband and wife respectively shows the different faces of Helen. Helen pretends she was totally loyal to the Greeks but Menelaus remembers a different truth: his wife was definitely on the side of the Trojans and tried to lure the Achaeans into destruction. One wonders if Menelaus is too dumb to realize that he is hurting his wive's reputation by divulging this secret. Or are we to understand that there is a subtle hostility underlying the relationship of the couple? I tend to opt for the first alternative and can well imagine Helen kicking Menelaus under the table for his clumsiness.

Helen's specifically female power is expressed in another manner as well. She is in charge of drugs or potions: at the end of an emotionally tiring scene when the dead heroes are remembered by Menelaus and Telemachus, she gives the men a drug which will drown their sorrows. "Helen, meanwhile... had a happy thought. Into the bowl in which their wine was mixed, she slipped a drug that had the power of robbing grief and anger of their sting and banishing all baleful memories." (IV, 220-221) As we shall see, drugs and potions are the province of dangerous women. Poisons can make up for the lack of physical strength.

For the rest, Helen can be considered a good wife. She is a perfect hostess and she seems to have a harmonious life with Menelaus.

The maiden: Nausicaa

It has often been pointed out that the poet of the *Odyssey* was an acute observer of human nature. The primary preoccupation of a virgin of marriageable age is to find a good husband. Thus Nausicaa has a dream in which she is urged by Athena to go and have the household linen washed in preparation for her marriage. Yet maiden modesty puts some constraints on her language. She tells her father that it is her bachelor brothers' clothes that need to be washed. "She spoke in this way because she was too shy to mention her marriage to her father. But he understood her thoroughly..." (6, 66-67)

Later on she will meet Odysseus and her thoughts will once again dwell on marriage. This can be shown by what she tells him " ... I can imagine one of the baser sort (in the town) saying... Who is this tall

and handsome stranger Nausicaa has in tow? Where did she run across him? Her future husband no doubt!" Perhaps Nausicaa indulges in wishful thinking here. At any rate, there is no doubt that she has fallen for Odysseus because later at the house she will stare at him : "Now Nausicaa, in all her heaven sent beauty, was standing by one of the pillars that supported the massive roof. Filled with admiration as her eyes fell on Odysseus, she greeted him warmly..." (8, 457-460) Unfortunately Odysseus will have to reject her.

Let us turn our attention to Nausicaa's excursion, however, for it creates an important backdrop for the perception of maidenhood. Nausicaa and her companions, other young girls, will find themselves in a marginal space, namely a place *outside* the city-limits. The separation of the maidens from their home is very reminiscent of female puberty rites in which a period of seclusion precedes marriage. I am not suggesting here that Nausicaa is being initiated into womanhood in a ritual sense, but rather that the literary form of the episode seems to be modelled consciously or unconsciously on a rite of passage.

Actually, several myths or tales exhibit the same basic structure. The maiden is secluded before marriage or at least finds herself outside the urban space. Persephone and companions picking flowers in the field furnishes the best example from Greek mythology, but one might add Red Riding Hood in the woods, Snow-White in the forest. There follows a frightening encounter with sexuality. Hades appears in his chariot from a deep chasm in the earth in the case of Persephone. Snow-White has no frightening experience, her meeting with the dwarfs can rather be seen as a period of apprenticeship in domesticity. But Red Riding Hood has a truly scary encounter with the wolf who, as has been pointed out, may symbolize a threat of rape.

Nausicaa's encounter with Odysseus will take place in extra urban space. Odysseus makes a frightening sight, wild and nude as he is. The fact that Nausicaa holds her own is due to her upbringing and natural poise. The poet has made a real person out of her. Yet this should not obscure the fact that the scene gains momentum because it conforms to a story-pattern of initiation, a pattern familiar to the Greeks which we may, with Burkert, call the 'Maiden's Tragedy'. Note that Nausicaa is compared to Artemis the virgin goddess (6, 151), the domain of which is the wilderness, i.e. marginal space, and one of the functions of whom is to initiate young maidens into womanhood.

The association of the maiden with the wilderness is due to the Greek belief that virgins are not yet conquered, they are untamed. Let us remember that the Greek word for wife is 'damar', subjugated.

Thus while the mature woman is seated by the hearth, maidenhood is expressed through marginality and preoccupation with marriage,

although admittedly there is more to Nausicaa's character than just this.

Marginal seductresses: Circe and Calypso

Marginality does not only characterize maidenhood, but another type of woman, the seductress. She is situated in the wilderness, rather than in urban and domestic space. Dangerous because untamed, such women represent threat to men and the social order. Both Circe and Calypso try to take Odysseus out of circulation, and keep him to themselves.

Circe's domain is an island, lush, jungle-like. We are in the realm of nature, not culture. Her house is set in the woods and is surrounded by wild animals. These animals, of course, are the men that she has turned into beasts. Still their presence reinforces the setting as being part of nature untamed and unpredictable.

I shall not dwell here on the folk motif of Circe's habit of turning men into animals. This has been dealt with by the late Sir Denys Page among others. Rather, I wish to explore Circe's persona and motives. When Odysseus' men first meet her she sits at the loom singing. One might think that the loom is out of place in a witch's home. Yet, since it constitutes an essential attribute of womanhood, it is a necessary attribute to define Circe's femininity. The singing, however, alludes to sexual temptation, for it could be associated with *hetairai*. Remember also the song of the sirens, seductive and dangerous. Circe's home is devoid of servants. There is no hearth. All the elements of domesticity are deliberately omitted. Her weapons are a wand and, more importantly, a potion. Like Helen (and Medea), she is an expert in drugs.

Why does Circe turn men into beasts? I suggest that her action denotes contempt for those men who are no match for herself: only the man who can outwit her will be an appropriate mate. This type of folk motif by which the princess tests the power or skills of her prospective suitors is too widely spread to need much elaboration. From Atalante and Hippodameia to Puccini's Tourandot, the pattern is always the same: the suitor who fails is killed, but he who succeeds marries the woman. Thus, when Odysseus does not succumb to Circe's magic and draws his sword, her response is immediate and direct: she asks him to go to bed with her. The dangerous witch is transformed into an ideal partner who is not only innocuous but positively supportive of Odysseus and his men. One can hardly blame them for spending a year there.

Calypso is slightly different; she is a nymph rather than a witch. But she too lives on an island away from the civilized world. Her home is a cave: her domesticity is thus dubious, founded in nature not in

culture. (Note, however, that the loom is a neccessary attribute in this case also; when Hermes visits Calypso he finds her working at the loom).

As Vernant has noted, the very name 'Calypso' indicates remoteness from culture. It means the 'hiding one'; for not only is she herself concealed, but she also hides Odysseus from the rest of the world. Nobody, except the gods, knows where he is.

She, of course, hides Odysseus because she wants to keep him forever, even make him immortal. But Odysseus has become bored with her: "the nymph did not please him any longer.."(5, 153) This life does not suit him and he longs for home, where he can express his true identity. Interestingly enough the raft, the vehicle by which Odysseus will be able to depart, represents the intrusion of culture, *techne*, in the wilderness. Odysseus shows himself as a true man of culture when he constructs it. Calypso, the woman of nature, will have to let him go.

The widow: Penelope

It is time now to look at the most important woman in the poem, Odysseus' faithful wife Penelope. Is faithful Penelope above every reproach? Is she the model wife? The answer must be yes, of course, because the necessities of the plot, not to mention the emotional tone of the *Odyssey*, dictate that the hero should come back to a loyal spouse. I shall not dwell here on the good qualities of Penelope, nor on the praise bestowed upon her in the *nekyia* by the ghost of Agamemnon (11, 444-446). Rather, I shall concentrate on those traits of her character which reveal her to be far more complex that we might suspect at first. She too has a bag of feminine tricks. She is perceptive like Arete and Helen, cunning and manipulative like Helen. Above all she is looking after her own best interest: like Circe she is determined to pick the best man. If she hasn't married anyone yet, it is because she hasn't found anybody better than Odysseus.

We are conditioned to think of Penelope as pining away thinking about Odysseus. Yet she allows a number of suitors, the floruit of Cephalonian youths, to court her. Let us see how some of the characters in the *Odyssey* perceive Penelope. "As for her", says Telemachus when speaking about his mother, "she neither refuses (the suitors), though she hates the idea of remarrying, nor can she bring herself to take the final step." (1, 250-251) Telemachus has difficulties understanding his mother's motives and is rightly concerned that his father's fortune is being eaten away.

The suitor, Antinous, says the following, addressing himself to Telemachus: "It is your own mother, that incomparable schemer, who is the culprit. Listen. For three whole years – in fact close to four –

she has kept us on tenderhooks, giving us all ground for hope, and in her private messages to each making promises that she has not the slightest intention of keeping." (2, 85-92) He goes on to tell the well-known story of how Penelope is weaving in the morning and undoing the work at night because, upon the completion of the work, she will have to choose one of the suitors as a husband. The story, by the way, is corroborated by Penelope herself in book 19 when she tells the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) how she has been tricking the suitors (19, 148-150). Thus, granted that Antinous is an unlikable character, his account of Penelope's behavior is hardly contradicted by the facts.

That Penelope invites attention of the young men can be shown by a passage in book 18:

"It was now that Athene, goddess of the flashing eyes, put it into the wise head of Icarius' daughter Penelope to appear before her suitors, with the idea of fanning their ardor to fever heat and enhancing her value to her husband and her son. Turning to one of her maids with a forced laugh she said: 'Eurynome, the spirit moves me, as it never has before, to pay these lovers of mine a visit..." (18, 158-168).

All this reveals Penelope as both coquettish and flirtatious. Consider now a dream that she has right before Odysseus will reveal himself as the master of his household. Ironically enough she tells the dream to the beggar, who is no other than her husband in diguise.

"Let me ask you to interpret a dream of mine. I keep a flock of twenty geese in the place. They come in from the pond to pick up their grain and I *delight* in watching them. In my dream I saw a great eagle swoop down from the hills and break their necks with his crooked beak, killing them all. There they lay on a heap on the floor while he vanished in the open sky. I wept and cried out loud, though it was only a dream... But the bird came back. He perched on a jutting timber on the roof, and breaking into human speech he checked my tears. 'Take heart', he said, 'daughter of the noble Icarius. This is not a dream but a happy reality which you shall see fulfilled. The geese were your lovers, and I that played the eagle's part am now your husband, home again and ready to deal out grim punishment to every man among them." (19, 535-550)

It is worth analyzing this dream as it sheds light on Penelope's psychological state. Let me first make clear that I do not believe that one can interpret the dream in a Freudian sense. After all it is not a real person's account but rather a literary device, an allegory which is meant to draw attention to certain elements of the situation and thus deepen our understanding of the characters.

That Odysseus is the eagle and the suitors the geese we already know from the omen which Telemachus witnessed before leaving Sparta and which Helen interpreted for him (see above). What is

interesting in the dream is Penelope's relationship to the geese and to the eagle. The geese are her pets, they are *tame* and she tends them. The eagle is superior to the geese but he is also wild and untamable. He kills the domestic birds and flies away.

The geese do not harass Penelope, they serve her. This certainly puts her relationship to the suitors in a different light and contradicts what she tells the beggar.

"But I am left to my misery: the powers above have heaped so many troubles on my head. For all the island chieftains that rule in Dulichium, in Same, and in wooded Zakynthus, or that live here in our own sunny Ithaca, there is not one that is not forcing his unwelcome suit upon me and plundering my house. ... I simply wear my heart out in longing for Odysseus..." (19, 129-136)

To return to the dream: Penelope's first reaction is grief at the loss of her pets; yet, there is no cause for lament. For ultimately she will come to realize that it is better for her to have the eagle, the superior and stronger bird, who is going to return to her. The woman must be pleased to get the strongest: she must choose the best.

The dream in fact foreshadows the test of the bow which Penelope herself will initiate to make sure that she does marry the best man.

"... Penelope, rising on tiptoe, fetched the bow down from its peg in the shining case that covered it.... she set down for the hall to face the proud lords who were courting her, carrying the bow and quiver... Then veiling her cheeks with a fold of her bright head-dress, the noble lady took her stand by the pillar of the massive roof and without further ado issued her challenge to the Suitors:

'... I challenge you to try your skill on the great bow of King Odysseus. And whichever man among you proves the handiest at stringing the bow and shoots an arrow through everyone of these twelve axes, with that man I will go...." (19, 42-79)

Test and dream thus combined shed light on Penelope's personality and especially her situation.

But what exactly is her situation? In fact she conforms to a feminine stereotype which we have not as yet encountered in the other females in the poem: the widow. As O. Andersen has shown, the widow was perceived as dangerous (i.e. threatening the social order) in Classical Greece. Is it a coincidence that in the Funeral Oration of Thucydides, Pericles makes a special appeal only to those women in widowhood (*en chereia*) to uphold their virtue? Andersen finds other examples in ancient literature down to St. Paul showing that widows were perceived as disruptive since they were especially susceptible to sexual temptation. Freed from the constraints that virginity imposes on maidens and yet not being past reproductive age, widows can be objects for male contention. Penelope is attractive and at the same time tempting in a special way.

Before we leave the subject of Penelope, something must be said about another way by which she tests Odysseus. Not being sure that he is not an impostor, she makes a casual remark to the effect that their marriage bed should be moved outside. Odysseus gets exasperated because he knows the bed is unmovable being made out of a tree-trunk which is still rooted. Then and only then, does she get convinced of his true identity. But this is not the point that interests us here; it is rather the fact that Odysseus falls right into her trap. In that way she emerges as his equal in wits.

Perhaps this is why she is interesting. She is not simply the loyal wife. She is also the cunning widow capable of manipulating men and using the situation to her advantage.

Role inversion: The Laestrygonian's wife

All the above females represent different aspects of womanhood. Femininity, however, can be defined also through its opposite, through norm-inversion. For this we must search in the remotest parts of the world where Odysseus' adventures take him. At the northernmost edge of the earth, well beyond the confines of civilization, the hero encounters a tribe of cannibals, the Laestrygonians.

I hope I will be permitted a small digression on cannibalism at this point. A study by W. Arens states that most accounts about cannibals were in fact *not* eye-witness reports; rather, they were based on preconceptions of how savages *ought* to behave. Thus, even in recent times cannibalism is a mark of 'otherness' separating the savage from the civilized.

In the *Odyssey* too the Laestrygonians can be regarded as the savages *par excellence*. Their wives are bound to be unfeminine. In fact, we meet only one, the leader Antiphates' wife. Already her appearance betrays norm-inversion: she was big as a mountain, says the poet. (10, 113) Obviously very large women were not considered handsome. But her least attractive aspect is yet to come. For it is she who notifies her husband to come and have Odysseus' men killed and be cooked up for dinner. (10, 115-116) Cooking humans, and especially guests, inverts the customs of hospitality and the functions of the hearth with which women are associated.

The battle of the sexes

The female characters in the *Odyssey* represent different aspects of womanhood. As we have seen, women are not perceived negatively. They are hospitable and loyal but also complex, clever, manipulative, seductive. Seductiveness conceals danger - this is especially obvious in the case of the sirens whose seductive song leads to death. Granted

that the latter are monsters, they are nevertheless female as J.-P. Vernant points out.

Women, however, should not be seen in isolation but in relation to men. When we observe the interaction of the genders, it emerges that their interests do not always coincide but that something of a battle, subtle but unmistakable, is going on.

For example, all females in the *Odyssey* are sedentary, rooted in their home, be that in the city, or on the islands of Calypso and Circe in the margins of civilization. Odysseus, on the other hand, is a wanderer. He stays with many of his women for a given period of time, but then he moves on.

He will not even stay with Penelope. Before they even made love he tells her: "My dear, we have not yet come to the end of our trials. There lies before me still a great and hazardous adventure, which I must see through to the very end... That was what Teiresias' soul predicted for me when I went down to the House of Hades to find a way home for my followers and myself. So come to bed now, my dear wife and let us comfort ourselves while we can with a sweet sleep in each other's arms." (23, 248-255) But Penelope insists on knowing what he means. Odysseus answers reproachfully: "Why drag it out of me? ... Well you shall hear the whole tale. I'll make no secret of it. Not that you'll find it to your liking!" (23, 264-266) Then he tells her that he will have to wander once more. He is like the eagle who has to fly away although he will eventually return.

If Odysseus is perpetually on the move, his women will employ all kinds of tricks to keep him. Calypso will offer him immortality. Circe will not attempt to make him stay, but there is no sign that she wants him to leave. It is he who initiates the move for departure and he is clearly nervous when he breaks the news knowing that Circe will not like it: "(He) clasped the goddess' knees in prayer, while she listened.."(10, 480-481). The clasping of the knees is meant to appease a potential anger.

As for Nausicaa, she too hopes to keep him. She tells her companions: "Listen my white-armed maids, while I tell you what I have been thinking. This man's arrival among the Phaeacians ... was not unpremeditated by the Olympian powers. For when first we met I thought he cut a sorry figure, but now he looks like the gods who live in heaven. That is the kind of man that I fancy as a husband, if he would settle here. I only hope he will choose to stay." (6, 239-245). Odysseus, however, will wander away.

This pattern is, of course, not unique to the *Odyssey* but I shall abstain from using other examples from ancient literature such as can be found in tragedy or Herodotus or in Virgil's *Aeneid*. That women try to trap men, or at least manipulate them, by using their sexuality, wits or other stealthy weapons, such as poison, is a common

theme in world literature. On the other hand, the Casanovas and Don Giovannis will always try to seduce women and then leave them. The arena of conflict is marriage.

Let me quote from the witty, albeit controversial, American author Henry Louis Mencken who was fashionable in the teens of our century. In his *In Defense of Women*, a satirical little book on the relation of the sexes, he says:

"Turn for example, to the field in which the two sexes come most constantly into conflict ... to the field, ... of monogamous marriage." (21). And further: "A man in full possession of the modest faculties that nature commonly apportions to him is at least far enough above idiocy to realize that marriage is a bargain in which he gets the worse of it, even when, in some detail or other, he makes a visible gain." (23)

What sociobiologists tell us

The battle of the sexes, especially when it comes to marriage is such an all-pervading theme in world literature, ancient and modern, that it would seem to be in need of an explanation. I am convinced that it is triggered by a deeply rooted biological mechanism and by a recognition that the sexes *are* really different. This undoubtedly explains sex-based metaphors in literature and art as well as the composite perfect sex of fantasy, the Hermaphrodite (see also Ajoutian in this volume). But what is this biological blueprint?

This is where the relatively new sciences of ethnology and sociobiology come to our aid. Sociobiologists have drawn attention to the fact that men and women have different reproductive interests. Assuming theoretically that each intercourse can result into pregnancy, it costs a man very little to indulge in casual sex. It is, in fact, in his interest to spread his genes as far and wide as possible. The case is different for women. Pregnancy means nine months of carrying the child plus several years of care. This is a considerable investment in the offspring. Women must therefore be choosier than men and they try to secure a good father for their child, a father who will protect both the pregnant mother and the child to be born. Thus: "Women and men usually pursue different strategies because they usually have different reproductive interests." Both sexes get better at these strategies over evolutionary time. "Casanovas will get better at seducing women and then abandoning them, and women will get better at detecting Casanova tendencies..." (Weinreich, 346).

Of course, none of this is to deny that many men are and like to be monogamous, or that many women are polygamous. The biological approach that I am using is not deterministic, it only shows tendencies. Sociobiological theory tries to detect the biological logic of

behavior without presupposing that the rules are binding and irrevocable.

To return to the women in the *Odyssey*. They at first appear sedate and subdued. When they make a public appearance they are often seated or standing by a pillar so as not to attract attention. "Telemachus' mother sat opposite them by a pillar of the hall...spinning the delicate thread on her distaff..." (17, 96) Or: "Nausicaa ... was standing by one of the pillars that supported the massive roof." (8, 458)

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the female characters prove a good match for the men, capable of outwitting them, if necessary. Remember that both Helen and Penelope can outwit their husbands. There again I would like to detect a deeply ingrained biological recognition: that society cannot function without some kind of balance between the genders. Even in a world superficially dominated by men, women have to be given their due credit. The battle of the sexes is just a game which ultimately betokens harmony rather than conflict.

*The translations are from the Penguin Classics edition by E.V. Rieu, Harmondsworth 1946.

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